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ABSTRACT

This study of 51 primarily white families with 3-year-old children was designed to demonstrate the relationship between the qualities of children's narratives and measures of family relationships. Children were asked to complete stories involving a range of affect and conflict themes, parent-child dyads were asked to complete several narratives, and several parent questionnaires were used to assess family relationships and adaptation. Results demonstrated that higher levels of marital satisfaction and lower levels of maternal psychological distress, conflict between parent and child, and child behavior problems were associated with higher levels of boys' narrative coherence and fewer aggressive themes in girls' narratives. Higher levels of parental assistance and child participation in parent-child dyads were associated with more coherent narratives in boys and fewer aggressive themes in girls. (MDM)

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ED 366 409

AGGRESSION AND COHERENCE IN CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES: LINKS WITH FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND ADAPTATION

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Paper presented as part of the symposium Construction and co-construction of preschoolers' narratives about emotions: Family influences (Chair: David Oppenheim) at the 60th anniversary meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, March 1993, New Orleans. Address correspondence to first author at the Department of Psychology, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel (bitnet RSPS204@HAIFAUVM, FAX number 972-4-253896.)

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CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

There is growing interest in studying children's narratives about affect and conflict themes because such ***narratives may provide an important window*** into children's emotional organization and relationship experiences. Furthermore, individual differences in the themes and organization of children's narratives may reflect individual differences in socioemotional adaptation.

We speculate, moreover, that narratives are not only an epiphenomenon of children's emotional organization. Rather, ***the construction of narratives about emotionally laden and conflictual events is an essential process*** involved in adaptation, particularly during the preschool years in which children enter, participate in, and construct the world of narrative.

Narrative construction typically happens in ***Co-Construction conversations*** between children and parents when they discuss emotionally salient events. Being able to organize complex and emotionally charged experiences in narrative form with the aid of emotionally available caregivers and other members of their social networks facilitates children's development and introduces new modes of intersubjectivity.

GOALS OF THE STUDY

1) To demonstrate associations between children's narratives and measures of family relationships and adaptation. Aspects of family and child functioning studied involved measures of:

   a) the ***parents*** (Marital Satisfaction and Psychological Distress),

   b) the ***parent-child relationship*** (Conflict in the relationship and observations of Co-Constructions),

   c) the ***child*** (Behavior Problems).

2) To predict children's narratives at age 4 from family and child measures at ages 3 and 4 years.

METHOD

Subjects were 51 primarily white volunteer families. Target children were three years old at the first visit and four years old at the second visit.

Observational Measures

Child Narratives were assessed using the ***MacArthur Story-Stem Battery*** in which children are asked to complete stories enacted using dolls and involving a range of affect and conflict themes. Themes of aggression, verbal conflict, and escalation of conflict, as well as atypical negative responses were coded from children's narratives and aggregated to total score of children's ***Aggressive Themes***. In addition the ***Coherence*** of children's stories was rated.

Parent-Child Co-constructions were observed in two contexts in which parents and children were asked to construct a narrative. In one observation mothers and children were asked to construct a narrative about parents leaving on a vacation using a doll-house with dolls and props. In the second observation mothers and children were asked to construct a narrative for a wordless and emotionally evocative picture book. Fathers and children were also observed in the picture book situation. Parent-child interactions were rated on a number of rating scales which were later aggregated into ***Parental Assistance*** and ***Child Participation*** composites. Mothers' and children's scores were significantly correlated across situations and were therefore collapsed.

Questionnaires

The following questionnaires were used to assess family relationships and adaptation. All questionnaires were completed by both parents independently.

Dyad Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) was used to assess marital satisfaction.

Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Derogatis, 1975) was used to assess level of parental psychological distress.

Parent Child Relationship Questionnaire (PCRQ) (Furman, 1990). This report focuses on one subscale, Power Assertion, which measures parent-child conflict.

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) was used to assess children's behavior problems.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents results regarding the stability of the measures in the study from ages 3 to 4 years, and shows ***very high stability for parental report measures and good stability for the Child Participation aggregate***. Maternal Assistance shows stability when parents interacted with girls but parent–son interactions did not show stability.

Tables 2 and 3 present results linking measures of family relationships and adaptation to children's narratives. ***Table 2*** presents the associations between age 3 measures and children's narratives at 4–years, and in general shows that ***both observational and parental self–report measures of family members' socioemotional adaptation and of family relationships predict children's narratives one year later***, with the links being clearest with ***boys' Narrative Coherence*** and with ***Girls' Aggressive Themes***.

Table 3 presents the contemporaneous associations between measures of family relationships and adaptation and children's narratives at age 4 and shows the same pattern: ***Links are strongest with boys' Coherence and with Girls' aggressive themes***.

More specifically, both predictive and contemporaneous results showed that higher levels of ***marital satisfaction*** and lower levels of ***maternal psychological distress***, ***conflict between parent and child***, and ***child behavior problems*** were associated with higher levels of boys' ***Narrative Coherence*** and fewer ***Aggressive Themes*** in girls. Observations of co–constructions followed the same pattern: Higher levels of ***Parental Assistance*** and ***Child Participation*** were associated with ***more coherent*** narratives in boys and ***fewer aggressive themes*** in girls.

To better interpret these results, ***Table 4*** presents gender comparisons on the narrative measures and shows that ***boys developed significantly more Aggressive Themes than did girls*** and that ***girls' narratives were significantly more coherent than boys'***. Comparisons of standard deviations show more variance in **boys'** aggressive themes, ruling out that the associations between the family and child measures and Aggressive Themes (found to be stronger for girls) are because of larger variance in girls Aggressive Themes.

CONCLUSIONS

1) Children's narratives about affect and conflict themes are associated in predictable, theoretically meaningful ways with the socioemotional adaptation of children and parents and with the quality of family relationships.

2) The expression of differences in family functioning in children's narratives depends on children's gender: In general, ***Narrative Coherence*** serves as the "indicator" of family functioning for boys, and ***Aggressive Themes*** is the "indicator" of family functioning for girls. Importantly, this pattern of results is not simply an artifact of gender differences in the variability of coherence or aggression.

3) In general, the ***same pattern of results*** is true when children narratives are linked to ***early*** (age 3 years) and ***contemporary*** (age 4 years) family and child measures.

4) This report represents a first step in showing that narratives about affectively laden and conflictual themes elicited from children using a story completion approach are not only important to study in their own right, but also important expressions as well as potential contributors to child and family socioemotional adaptation and to the quality of family relationship. These results also suggest that how children express in narratives the emotional climate of their families may differ for boys and girls. These early results await replication, and more research is needed to specify the pathways linking family and child functioning to children's narratives.

TABLE 1

STABILITY OF STUDY MEASURES BETWEEN AGES 3 AND 4 YEARS

Observational Measures	Boys	Girls
Maternal Assistance	.24	.75**
Paternal Assistance	−.02	.30+
Child Participation	.39*	.53**

Parental Reports	Boys	Girls
DAS Mother	.80**	.58**
DAS Father	.91**	.83**
BSI Mother	.58**	.59**
BSI Father	.58**	.78**
Power Assertion Mother	.71**	.81**
Power Assertion Father	.64**	.82**
CBCL Mother	.83**	.71**
CBCL Father	.73**	.88**

TABLE 2
PREDICTING CHILD NARRATIVES AT 4 YEARS FROM AGE 3 MEASURES

Parental Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Marital Satisfaction – Mother (DAS)	.35*	.00	–.11	–.26+
Marital Satisfaction – Father (DAS)	.33*	–.10	.02	–.37*
Psychological Distress – Mother (BSI)	–.38*	–.18	.38*	.57*
Psychological Distress – Father (BSI)	–.24	–.13	–.03	.17

Parent–Child Relationship Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Maternal Assistance (observed in co–const.)	.13	.22	–.05	–.38*
Paternal Assistance (observed in co–const.)	–.06	.19	–.23	.02
Child Participation (observed in co–const.)	.29+	.38*	–.13	–.41*
Power Assertion – Mother (PCRQ)	–.43*	–.02	.45*	.50**
Power Assertion – Father (PCRQ)	–.12	–.27+	.02	.54**

Child Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Child Behavior Problems – Mother (CBCL)	–.53**	–.03	.36*	.63**
Child Behavior Problems – Father (CBCL)	–.35*	.05	.26	.56**

TABLE 3

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN CHILD NARRATIVES AND STUDY MEASURES AT 4 YEARS

Parental Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Marital Satisfaction – Mother (DAS)	.13	–.24	.08	–.01
Marital Satisfaction – Father (DAS)	.30+	–.12	.08	–.48**
Psychological Distress – Mother (BSI)	–.42*	.03	.15	.42*
Psychological Distress – Father (BSI)	.09	–.26	.00	.22

Parent–Child Relationship Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Maternal Assistance (observed in co–const.)	.00	.16	–.14	–.33*
Paternal Assistance (observed in co–const.)	.29+	–.11	–.38*	–.06
Child Participation (observed in co–const.)	.45*	.13	–.24	–.43*
Power Assertion – Mother (PCRQ)	–.44*	.01	.53*	.48**
Power Assertion – Father (PCRQ)	–.04	–.20	–.04	.57**

Child Measures	**Narrative Coherence**		**Aggressive Themes**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Child Behavior Problems – Mother (CBCL)	–.48**	.02	.31+	.67**
Child Behavior Problems – Father (CBCL)	–.26	.03	.13	.65**

TABLE 4

GENDER COMPARISONS OF NARRATIVE MEASURES

Narrative Measure	Boys		Girls			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*
Narrative Coherence	6.67	1.43	7.41	1.31	1.91	.03
Aggressive Themes	1.72	1.32	.95	.70+	2.56	.004

+ SD of Aggressive Themes for boys significantly larger than girls' (F=3.55, p=.003)